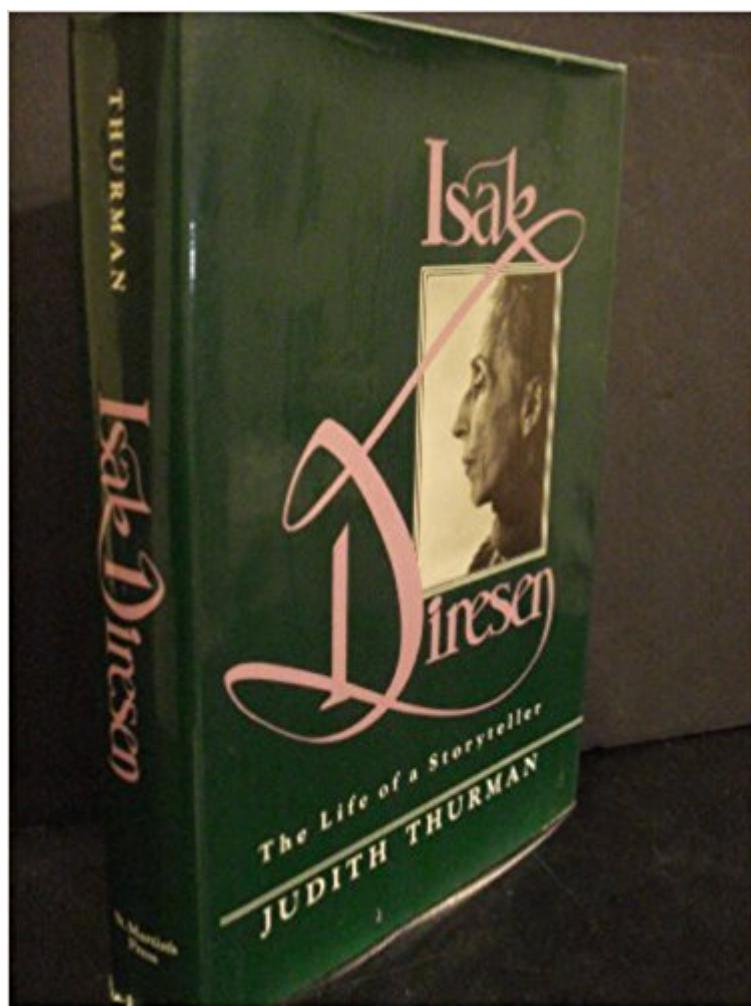


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# Isak Dinesen: The Life Of A Storyteller



## Synopsis

With exceptional grace, Judith Thurman 's classic work explores Dinesen's life--her privileged but unhappy childhood in Denmark, her marriage to Baron Blixen, their immigration to Africa on the eve of World War I, and her passionate affair with Denys Finch Hatton. Until the appearance of this book, the life and art of Isak Dinesen have been--as Dinesen herself wrote of two lovers in a tale--"a pair of locked caskets, each containing the key to the other." Judith Thurman has provided the master key to them both. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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"This, like the best biographies, is a book in which the reader can live."--Margaret Drabble, The New York Times Book Review "Splendid, inestimably valuable . . . I cannot imagine that it will be supplanted. Right now it is the essential book on Isak Dinesen."--Chicago Tribune Book World"Absorbing biography . . . This is a gothic tale worthy of the author of Seven Gothic Tales."--Victoria Glendinning, The Washington Post Book World -- Review"This, like the best biographies, is a book in which the reader can live."--Margaret Drabble, The New York Times Book Review "Splendid, inestimably valuable . . . I cannot imagine that it will be supplanted. Right now it is the essential book on Isak Dinesen."--Chicago Tribune Book World"Absorbing biography . . . This is a gothic tale worthy of the author of Seven Gothic Tales."--Victoria Glendinning, The Washington Post Book World --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Judith Thurman, critic and biographer, won the National Book Award and two foreign literary prizes

for her work. She is also the author of *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette*, and her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times*, among many other publications. She lives in New York City. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The main problem with the book is that Karen ( aka Isak, Tania, Tanne, etc.) is not particularly likeable. She may have been a charming and captivating storyteller; however, she was beset with personal (low self esteem) and physical ( syphilis) problems. Thurman paints Dinesen as needy with Finch Hatton but strong and demanding with her farm ( e.g. fair with her servants, which was unusual for the time). Dinesen and Denys Finch Hatton shared, at least, one childish trait: They both wanted what they wanted and would hardly compromise. This may have been the main downfall of their love affair. Thurman dissects Dinesen's life diligently but not in a pedantic way- in an interesting way. We find out a lot about Isak's Father ( died young) and how he influenced her, a lot about her emotionally withholding Mother, a lot about the times ( early 1900s) in Denmark, a lot about the semi-aristocracy. Isak's world was on the brink of the modern age and so was she--a modern woman- she thought- who still had one foot in 18th century tales of her childhood and, thus, was affected by this disappearing life-style, even in Africa. The colonial life was a holdover from an earlier era. Actually, this way of living was perfect for Dinesen who loved the male- oriented life and the servant- oriented household which allowed her to assert her femaleness, her differentness, her uniqueness. Thurman tells us more and more about the people in Dinesen's long life, more about Dinesen's writings and her public persona as she gains fame worldwide and as she ages. She created herself more as a character as she lived longer. Marketed herself well as an odd person and crone to fit in with her perceived old storyteller image, which she cultivated . This biography did deserve the National Book Award, which it garnered--- excellent work on Thurman's part.

Isak Dinesen seems almost to have been born on a stage. She was always theatrical and her father's suicide was theatrical in a way that Dinesen at a very young age appreciated. She learned from an aunt that her father had killed himself because he loved another woman, not his wife. Killing oneself for love was right down the girl Tania's\* alley. She had adored her father but his death became the ultimate gesture. Tania had the odd habit as a girl of opening her large brown eyes wide, a trick that she would repeat her whole life and she would later paint kohl around her eyes and put belladonna drops in them so that her pupils were huge and cavernous. Throughout her life she always seems self-absorbed but acting a part which she tailored to the person or condition. The

great and final gesture of her father seems to repeat itself in the daughter who starved herself into the grave. As this splendid story of her life unwinds, she appears brittle as though any emotional drama would shatter her but although often teetering on the edge she pulls herself up again and again. Other reviewers have said that they became disenchanted with the megalomaniac Isak Dinesen who had a cruel streak. She did indeed, but her unattractive traits in no way diminish the quality of her work. Underneath the brittleness, underneath the cruelty was a poet's soul. "Out of Africa" reverberates with the strings of a harp. An enormous factor in Tania's life was the syphilis she caught in Africa from her husband Baron Bror Blixen. She became extremely ill and had to return to Denmark to be treated. But she said that catching syphilis was worth being married to a Baron and thus receiving the title Baroness Blixen. She wore her affliction sort of like a dueling scar. Because of the title she was able to blend socially with the upper crust population of Nairobi. Without it they would have ignored her. She and Bror divorced, his massive infidelities sinking the marriage. Bror married again, so awkwardly there were then two Baroness Blixens. But Tania had met Denys Finch Hatton and she didn't care. Denys, the younger son of an English earl was a cultured, charming man of thirty two when Tania first met him. Like so many women, she was bowled over by Deny's charm. Denys had always been a bit worshipped, even at Eton where he had cut a wide swath on the sheer force of his personality. He probably got so used to the universal adulation he received that he may have even expected it. He was selfish but nobody held that against him. His photographs don't do him justice; although prematurely bald he was considered very handsome. What one could not do was tie Denys down. When Tania became too possessive he backed off. He didn't want marriage or a child and was very ungracious with her when she told him she thought was pregnant. He was in England when she sent him a wire about the baby she called "Daniel." He cruelly wired back "Strongly suggest you cancel Daniel's visit." He seemed to have it all, yet were it not for his relationship with Tania and later with the notorious Beryl Markham he would be forgotten today, not having achieved anything noteworthy in his short life to document. I don't like him. Although a snob, Tania felt en rapport with the native population and her servants. They became in a way her sounding board. Farah, her major domo, was a Somali and he served her in several vital capacities until Tania was obliged to sell her farm and return to Denmark. Tania's brother, Thomas Dinesen, stayed at the farm for two years before he was married and he found Tania, who had a fierce temper, a hard person to live with but she also sank into mires of depression. She often did not tell the truth or wove into a situation her own off-beat slant of things. For instance, she was a poor horsewoman and when she could not control her horse long enough to mount it she called on her servants to help. When they couldn't control the horse either, Tania vowed she's never ride again

and accused the servants of not loving her. If the housework was done poorly, her minions hated her. A fellow colonialist said people were afraid of Tania, she was so fierce and absolutely determined to get her own way, which she usually did. That observer said he was afraid Tania would shoot someone. Denys called her Titania. It was inevitable that Tania would lose her African farm because the altitude was too high for growing coffee, and frequent droughts baked what crop there was to a crisp. While she was packing, Denys and Tania apparently had a huge row and Denys moved on- right into the arms of Beryl Markham. But fate intervened- Denys' plane, a Gypsy Moth named "Nzige" or Locust in Swahili crashed and Denys died at age 44. The blows of losing Denys, her farm, her beloved servants, the Africans for whom she felt an almost mystical bond, might have felled a lesser person. But Tania was a survivor. She now resembled the emaciated woman which she would be the rest of her life. Syphilis of the spine caused her a great deal of physical agony but she wrote and produced her masterpieces. She had been branded with the disease but her sufferings were like a badge of honor. She was a very complex lady to fathom but this biography is superb and if anybody can explain Tania, Judith Thurman can. Tania may have appeared to have acted in a cavalier manner towards her secretary, Clara, who was very educated as well as being enormously patient. Clara acted like a sounding board, but underneath Clara knew there was at least some affection for her in Tania's strange personality makeup. Even though she had been "exiled" twice, Clara came back as Tania was her "calling." A difficult part of Tania's life for a reader to understand was her platonic love affair in Denmark when Tania was 64 and the poet Thorkild Bjornvig was 32. Tania had a figurative hold on Bjornvig's jugular and she almost strangled him. Although Thorkild was married with a child, Tania insisted on the young man's spending most of his time with her, living in her house. The affair was exceedingly grotesque but for four years Bjornvig could not escape. They had formed a pact in which he would become a great poet through her. She alternately coddled him and vilified him, trying to possess him like she had tried to possess Denys. Finally the pact was broken and Bjornvig was free. Of course the whole sorry mess had a profound effect on Bjornvig's poor wife who felt inferior and when Bjornvig took a mistress Tania endeavored to shatter her life as well. Tania's photographs often show her smiling a crooked smile that is almost a smirk. As though God had played a trick on us for creating us at all. But her writings are sublime. Author Thurman describes "Out of Africa": "... "the serene perfection of the style, the sparseness of details, the attendance of the gods all signal that we have escaped from the gravity of practical questions and have gotten up into a purer element..." \*I use the name Tania throughout the review. This was Denys' pet name for her butler family called her Tanne, Africans called her Mrs. Karen and she was also addressed as Baroness Blixen.

Isak Dinesen, by Judith Thurman, is easily, although a biography, one of my favorite "stories", and one of the best books I've ever read. Thurman's style is such that her book comes across as more than just a biography, but a novel as well. Her writing is beautiful, and really does her subject, also a master story-teller, more than justice. Most importantly though, she thoroughly examines Dinesen's life objectively, even the awkward, sometimes reprehensible parts. Despite her subject's less than perfect character (whose perfect anyway?) she admires Dinesen's writing in a way that is not slavish but insightful and thorough. At many points, Thurman includes Dinesen's writing to state a point about her character, and the letters to and from the people in Dinesen's life are quite revealing, something that is a crucial part to understanding this complicated woman. Thurman rarely if ever judges her subject (that has to be pretty difficult as a biographer) but gives her opinion on what Dinesen's thoughts might have been concerning a situation, or a person. She also sometimes gives insight into what Dinesen's psychological motivations may have been at times. Never does Thurman insist she has the last word on this, but it is interesting to see what she has to say about her character, considering she studied Dinesen extensively for years. Additionally she also met/interviewed many of Dinesen's friends and family, and so includes their account of events as well. Last but certainly not least, as a woman and gender studies major in college, I thoroughly appreciate Thurman's feminist viewpoint, and she often makes insightful, women centered observations about Dinesen, her life, and her writing. Overall, a wonderful, fully 5 star book.

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